Review of Wendy Urban-Mead, *The Gender of Piety: Family, Faith, and Colonial Rule in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press 2015, xiv + 324 pp., ISBN 9-780821-421581

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Wendy Urban-Mead is an associate professor at Bard College. Her monograph is a historical account of the Brethren in Christ Church (BICC), a Zimbabwe-based North American Protestant mission, from the early colonial years to the initial decades of Zimbabwean independence. Questions that motivated the author to this research included: how a mission Church such as BICC fared in the colonial setting, namely among the Ndebele-speakers in Matabeleland; how its African members reacted to its teachings; and how the Church's identity evolved in the white-dominated settler society of southern Rhodesia (colonial Zimbabwe). Contrary to historical reconstructions through macroscopic frameworks that forego people-centred analyses, Urban-Mead relied on the life stories of six individuals (three men and three women) to convey the social, political and cultural factors that described their relationship with the Church, and through them to trace the expressions of the Church's identity within the changing political and historical conditions of the colonial and post-colonial era. The reconstruction of the stories was premised on text-based evidence collected in libraries in Zimbabwe, the United Kingdom and the United States and on intimate interviews with some of the key figures in the book, their relatives, Church members and others.

The book's distinctive element is Urban-Mead's discussion of piety as gendered, which referred to: 'the particular ways in which men and women learned to express and model their religious belief, right practice, and warmth of devotion in tandem with or opposition to other gendered expectations in their culture' (p. 9). By examining individual life stories she found that women and men developed different relationships with the Church, not least, as a result of culture-conditioned gender-specific responsibilities and lifestyles. The BICC, a Church of an Anabaptist and Pietist background with Protestant influences, expected believers to abstain from all worldly affairs and indulgences, such as drinking beer, multiple marriages, fashionable clothing and involvement in political activism. The author found that while the Church's ideals of piety did not generally hinder women from fulfilling their duties as wives and

experiencing motherhood, they conflicted substantively with male social norms and engagements. The author observed a pattern whereby men could abide by Church standards of living when they were younger or in their old days, but they were challenged to do so during their middle years, as these were the times when men socialised more, moved and worked in other places, and felt the weight of gender and kinship norms and the call to participate in political institutions and struggles most strongly.

The book consists of: Introduction, six main chapters, Conclusion, Notes, Glossary and Bibliography. The Introduction outlines the author's questions and motivations for this research and explains terminological choices as found in the title of the book. Here the author defines 'piety' in view of BICC identity and theology and her own discovery of gendered patterns in religious practice. The introduction also exposes the author's rationale for employing the innovative approach of life histories as embedded in kinship, cultural, historical and political webs. The stories are then presented chronologically in six different chapters, making it fairly easy for the reader to follow the political changes within Rhodesia and New Zimbabwe. The six stories close with a conclusion that reiterates the pacifist and non-interference positions of the Church paralleled to the less linear individual stories.

The chapters dedicated to male figures are characterised by a common thread: they expose changing and often clashing masculinities among members of the BICC under the influence of political and social conditions, cultural norms and family expectations. Chapter 1 is dedicated to Matsuba Ndlovu, one of the first Africans to be baptised when the first mission of the BICC settled at the Matopo Hills in Matabeleland. While as a young boy Matsuba had excellent relationships with the Church, his adulthood was marked by colonial politics halting his Church education and kinship-entrenched norms that demanded actions on his behalf not necessarily in line with BICC theology. The author's piecing together of this story reveals how age, gender, cultural norms and colonial indignities contributed to shape Matsuba's nonlinear relationship with the Church. The stronghold of conventional masculinities was especially pronounced in the story of Sandey Vundhla (Chapter 4), who played a central role in extending the Church's reach in the city of Bulawayo in post-WWII modernising Rhodesia. Stephen Ndlovu's story in Chapter 6, who became the second African Bishop of BICC in Zimbabwe, underscores in turn the pressure male believers felt to participate in political activism against sectarian violence following independence, but also the influence that a strong marriage had in the decision of one man to accept to serve the Church.

In the women-centred chapters, we see the author exploring a number of other themes. Why were more women becoming pastors in the early mission Church, and how did these female church-planters interact with colonial politics, rebel fighters and their own families in their roles as pastors? In Chapter 2 we learn about Maria Tshuma, who attended the early mission school after escaping a marriage arranged by her father and later became a highly venerated evangelist despite giving birth to two children seemingly out of wedlock. By piecing together Maria's story, the author suggests that evangelical skills and commitment may have served as a loophole for members who did not exactly fulfil the BICC piety ideals to remain actively involved. Chapter 3 is dedicated to NakaSeyemephi Ngwenya, a woman whose story illustrates a complex intersection of gender norms, colonial politics of resettlement and personal faith

underpinning women pastors' prevalence in Matabeleland North in the 1950s and after. In Chapter 6, readers meet Sithembile Nkala, a courageous pastor in Matabeleland South who was active during the liberation struggle when people had reasons to fear encounters with guerrilla fighters.

The Gender of Piety makes an instructive and insightful read, especially for students and scholars of gender, history, anthropology and religion and gender studies. Urban-Mead's choice to approach gender subjectivities as relational, exploring the lives of men and women in interdependence, is a welcome departure from paradigms in religion and gender studies which have centred on women's articulations and experiences exclusively. She furthermore conceives femininities and masculinities as evolving and fluid and even contradictory across life histories and accounts for the changing political environment, cultural norms and men's and women's relationships with relatives and spouses over the full lifecycle.

Scholars in religious studies have long debated how research should be done when it is recognised that religious traditions and lives are historical, contextual and inextricable from social realities. Urban-Mead's decision to look closely at the BICC theology of pietism and non-worldliness, and then to juxtapose this to individuals' experiences with the Church over the full arc of their lives and a study of Church identity in changing political conditions may comprise a pragmatic way out of the quagmire. Furthermore, while the author relied on interviewees' articulations to understand the social ramifications of their piety, she synthesised nuanced explanations for behaviours and patterns she observed, achieving in this way an interesting balance between describing and interpreting – another unresolved dichotomy within the field of religious studies.

However, limited discussion of how the author's cosmological, cultural and gender positionality affected investigations leaves a gap. Urban-Mead considers limitations about oral interviews, such that participants may craft their answers in view of what they perceive the researcher expects to hear (p. 26) and issues with her positionality as a white foreign researcher (Chapter 2). Her use of 'reiterative dialogue' (explained in Chapter 3) betrays a concern for placing more interpretative power in the hands of research participants. However, it still begs to be asked: how did the author approach and build relationships with the people she interviewed, how might her gender influenced how men and women responded to her, and how did she justify her research interest in the specific community and specific Church (was there a personal relationship to BICC)? Answers to such questions could give a better sense of the trust and epistemological overlaps/gaps between researcher and research participants during investigations and a more informed lens through which to appraise her findings.